

CERVICAL AND BACK PROBLEMS IN THE HORSE

(Myofascial pain and dysfunction)

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Back pain in man has always been a widespread problem and this can be equally so in the horse, who at the same time has to be an athlete. But as we take care and compensate for problems, they have to take the attitude and movements we ask them for.

The limbs of the horse are of course of great importance to its movability, but its neck and back, or to be more precise, the spine and its muscles, tendons etc., is definitely of no less importance. Not only does it have to carry the rider, but also together with the limbs to provide for the propulsion of the horse and for its balance, especially when the spine, still together with the limbs, is basis for the various exercises, movements or jumps that the horse must perform.

When speaking of neck/back problems, it is rarely the bones/vertebrae that are causing the problems, but nearly always the ligaments keeping them together or the tendons or fascias by means of which the muscles are fastened to vertebrae, pelvis or limbs.

Muscle injury is generally quickly healed, but injury to the above-mentioned tendon structures is healing more slowly. Therefore they are generally not always given the rest and time they need to recover. That is why injury often becomes chronic problems.

Experience shows that at least 30% of all horses in training - the percentage of course varies from stable to stable - are suffering from neck/back problems to such an extent, that their performance is remarkably decreased.

Unfortunately neck/back pain in the horse is an overlooked problem because the signs or the symptoms are often not very clear as they would be for example in a leg where the heat and swelling can be quite obvious.

How does the horse react when experiencing neck/back pain

The common overall factor is a decrease in performance either suddenly or gradually.

Other signs and symptoms can be

- Short potterly stride behind
- Lameness in and/or dragging of the toe on one or both hindlegs
- Ataxy
- Irregular placing of feet
- Soreness in the back muscles, flinching and perhaps crouching when the girth is tightened or the rider mounts
- Resistance to canter on either rein
- Resistance to change legs at the gallop

- Difficulty in collecting and keeping the horse on the bit
- Resistance or lack of ability to perform certain exercises
- Stiffness in the neck/back and poor flexion
- Abnormally high or sideways carriage of the head in relation to the body
- Horse tossing head around, rears, bucks and is perhaps dishonest when pushed
- Difference in the musculing over the hindquarters with muscle atrophy becoming apparent
- Crooked carriage of tail
- Sweating more than normal in patches or on one side
- Stallions snapping at or biting their groin or getting a twisted testicle
- Horse kicking in its box with one or both hindlegs, apparently without reason, as it seems to kick off something
- Appearance of spasms of the hind legs.

A racehorse that pulls very hard early on in the gallop but then suddenly dies back.

Trotting or carriage horses often go on an uneven rein, have an abnormal carriage of head and body and a preference to canter when they are pushed in a trot. Some go better on the one rein than the other.

Showjumpers may start to refuse, are specially stiff while warming up and remain so longer than usual, or show vigorous tail switching on landing.

All together these symptoms of a possible neck/back problem may appear suddenly but often have developed gradually, but will always result in a decreased performance, sometimes to a small degree but it also can make the horse unusable.

Where does it hurt?

Problems can of course occur anywhere along the length of the spine. But most often the suffering is located to shoulder area, lower part of the saddle area, lumbar- or sacroiliac areas.

In some cases the muscles in the saddle area and/or loin are tense and sore for palpation or even for a light touch. In many cases, however, you will apparently feel no soreness and the only indication of a possible disorder in the neck/back is one of the above-mentioned symptoms.

Causes can be many and of differing types

- A tumble or fall
- Slipping or becoming cast in his box. Many problems, not only with the back, occur because of slipping in the box
- Horse tugs himself free when tied and possibly goes over backwards
- Ulcers or sores in his mouth caused by ill fitting or worn bit, or bad teeth
- A poor rider with lacking balance, perhaps having back pain himself sitting in a crooked fashion putting more tension on one rein than the other, or pulling too much on both reins, so that nosebridge is coming below vertical line.
- An ill fitting or understuffed saddle
- Putting too much strain on the horse by using improper training methods can be the beginning of a lasting injury to not only young but older horses too
- Too short a warm-up period, cold, stiff muscles. An injury new or old, can be made worse or actually occur due to the cold. It is therefore important to use an exercise blanket during winter training
- Last but not least we must mention bad conformation that naturally is of great importance along with wear and tear

Back problems can also affect the function of the inner organs

Problems in the back are not only pain in the back, they can also be the cause of various disturbances of function not only of the back and limbs but also the inner organs. As is the case of the nerves that go from the spine between the vertebrae to the limbs, there are also nerves that go to the inner organs. If these nerves leave the spine from precisely the point where injury and swelling is, this can ignite a nerve irritation. This nerve irritation can, depending on the location, alter the temperament of the horse or for example the heart, lung or intestine function. The latter may result in a greater tendency of constipation or colic.

Also the ovaries of the mare can be affected so that the heat fails to appear or is disturbed, resulting in difficulties getting the mare in foal.

How do you treat back problems

The first step towards an effective treatment is obviously a very exact and correct diagnosis. If it is apparent that the problem has its roots in the form of a human error i.e. poor rider, then this must stop. Just as well as a bad back often through altered natural movement pattern can cause problems in the limbs e.g. bone spavin, a problem in the limbs can often after some while cause a bad back. Therefore it is important that you realize the cause and its effect and whether it is a primary or secondary problem. In the case of the latter any treatment of the back would be in vain unless the leg problem can be cured.

A thorough lameness-examination is therefore essential. Knowledge and experience is demanded, and it is necessary to examine the whole horse and not only the limbs or the back.

Acupuncture/trigger-point treatment is preferable. I think it works best and you can treat not only the main problem but also secondary problems which are more or less distinct.

In horses, I prefer laser to needles, as I find it works better and can be applied to the body anywhere without irritation or inconvenience to the horse.

Treatments performed in the right way and based on an exact diagnosis are giving really good results, as 80-90% of the patients are returning to their usual standards.

My experience dates from treating back problems-myofascial pain for 20 years, - first treating locally with cortisone or analgetics, then doing chiropractic, later injecting or needling in acupuncture points and the last 15 years using laser for trigger point- and local treatment for well over a thousand horses and nearly as many humans, - the latter having given a good contribution to the understanding of the nature and treatment of myofascial pain and dysfunction in the horse.

Laser, an abbreviation of Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation, is the huge physical discovery of this century of a special type of infrared light which in humans and animals stimulates the organism's biological process whereby we achieve two things, a noticeably speedier and better tissue regeneration (healing) and pain relief. Even in the case of old injuries a new healing process may begin. This means that one can, with advantage, use the laser for not only back injuries, but also for acute and chronic injuries in skin, tendons, tendon sheets, periosteum, bones, joints, muscles and nerves.

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